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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 HANOI 001098

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: Ambassador Visits Father Ly in Prison

REF: A) HANOI 821 B) HANOI 831

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Meeting with the Ambassador October 14, jailed political dissident Father Nguyen Van Ly reported that that he was "95 percent recovered" from his July 12 stroke. Ly said he remains isolated from other inmates but receives daily medical check-ups from prison physicians and maintains a full schedule, including regular prayer and Bible reading. Ly appeared more subdued than he was the last time he met the Ambassador; he refrained from the vociferous denunciations of Vietnam's communist authorities that characterized previous meetings with U.S. officials. Father Ly commented it was important for the government and dissidents to understand each others' perspective. Not surprisingly, he opined that Vietnam's laws violated international norms. Ly thanked the Administration and Congress for raising his case with GVN officials, but predicted he'll remain in jail for the remainder of his five-year term, since he will not "reform" his thinking. State media and prison officials were present throughout the 75-minute meeting. In a follow-on interview with television and print media journalists, the Ambassador reiterated his request that the GVN release Father Ly. END SUMMARY.

Pre-briefing from Prison Warden

¶2. (SBU) On October 14, the Ambassador and Poloff traveled to Nam Ha Prison in Ha Nam Province to meet with prominent political dissident Father Nguyen Van Ly. (NOTE: Post requested the meeting at the end of August when first notified about Father Ly's stroke, but was not permitted to visit the prison until now. END NOTE.) Immediately prior to the meeting, Prison Warden Thang gave a short briefing on Ly's current health situation. Thang stated that Ly's July 12 stroke (Ref. A), which he described as "minor," was the result of Ly's recurring high blood pressure. He claimed that Father Ly had failed to take his medication as instructed by prison doctors. Prison officials had provided emergency treatment and conducted daily checks of his blood pressure, which now averaged 140 over 90. Warden Thang stated that he would make arrangements for Father Ly to visit a specialist if Ly's health deteriorated. Ly's family had been notified about his condition, and the prison had allowed two priests from the Hue Archdiocese to visit (Ref B).

Father Ly on His Health Status and Daily Schedule

¶3. (SBU) Father Ly entered the room with an almost imperceptible

limp, but was clearly animated and in good spirits -- a mood which lasted throughout the 75-minute meeting. Father Ly thanked the Ambassador for his concern and described his health as "temporarily" fine. He explained that at the end of May he had experienced a sudden spike in his blood pressure and had blood in his stool. Although the situation stabilized in May after emergency treatment from prison doctors, he suffered a mild stroke on July 12, which Ly attributed to another sudden rise in blood pressure. His right arm and right leg had been temporarily paralyzed, but as a result of emergency treatment by prison doctors and a regular exercise regiment, Ly regained use of his right hand and leg. He described himself 95 percent recovered, and said that he is taking medicine provided by the prison doctors to maintain his blood pressure, as well as supplemental medicine provided by his family.

14. (SBU) Father Ly said that his spirits remain high, quipping that he has come to consider prison as his "official office." He wakes up every morning at 3:00 am and prays, reads the Bible, and recites mass three times before the prison's morning wakeup bell sounds; he recites his prayers and reads the scriptures eight times a day. He reads daily from the bilingual New Testament that the USCIRF delegation presented him in May, but asked the Ambassador to bring him a bilingual English Bible with the Old Testament the next time he visits. The prison has provided him with additional Catholic prayer books, bilingual dictionaries, and the Communist Party newspapers, The People (Nhan Dan) and The Law (Phap Luat), which he said he reads daily. Ly also watches several hours of television in the evening and on Sunday. He enjoys gardening in

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his 15-square-meter courtyard and exercises twice daily. While Ly is entitled, consistent with Vietnamese law, to a one-hour visit every month by family, the distance and expense of a monthly trip is too much for his relatives in Ho Chi Minh City. As a result, his nieces and nephews rotate, each visiting him every other month. He joked that although he is kept in isolation, he is not alone. "God, wild birds, rats and his garden help keep me company."

Human Rights in Vietnam

15. (SBU) Turning to the issue of human rights in Vietnam, Father Ly said that this was a "complicated" issue. Unlike previous meetings with the Ambassador and USCIRF, Ly sounded almost conciliatory, stating that both sides (the GVN and dissidents) needed to consider human rights from the perspective of the other. He said, for example, that he had tried to understand restrictions on free speech. He thanked the Ambassador, the USG, and Congress for repeatedly raising his case and said that the Ministry of Public Security had told his family that he would be released early if he "reformed" his thinking. Father Ly acknowledged that he had violated GVN law, but insisted that such laws were not just, noting (with a bit of his customary flair) that Karl Marx and Ho Chi Minh had been arrested for their radical ideas and released. Warming to the theme, Ly emphasized that the Communist Party controlled the media and suppressed contradictory voices. Returning to a more conciliatory tone, Ly added that the Party took these actions to maintain stability so that it could "continue working for the people."

16. (SBU) Commenting on Vietnam's Universal Periodic Review before the UN Human Rights Council, Father Ly noted that countries in the third world that view Vietnam as a role model had supported Vietnam's position. Western nations, on the other hand, disagreed with Vietnam's catch-all national security provisions, and argued that Vietnam's practices violated fundamental individual rights, in

particular rights guaranteed by the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the UN Human Rights Declaration, which he said prevail over domestic law. Ly maintained that he was a prisoner of conscience and said that he knew he would not be released early unless he confessed and asked for forgiveness from the GVN. Father Ly asked the Ambassador what he should do. The Ambassador responded that Ly should do what he believed to be right. Father Ly agreed, adding that this would result in his remaining in prison for the five years he has left to serve.

Three Request of the Ambassador

17. (SBU) At the end of the meeting, Father Ly made three requests: 1) assist victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam; 2) pass on Ly's congratulations to President Obama for winning the Nobel Peace Prize and encourage him to use his standing to obtain peace in the Middle East; and 3) push for reform of the United Nations to assure world peace, a project that he estimated would take 300 years. Ly called on all world religions -- Buddhists, Muslims, Christians and Jews -- to work together to obtain peace. He said that the UN should establish an interdenominational peace organization based in either Brazil, Australia, or India and headed by either a Buddhist or Muslim to push for an end to religious conflict and world peace.

Press Interview Following Meeting

18. (SBU) Following his meeting with Father Ly, the Ambassador was questioned by a VTV television reporter and a print journalist. Asked about Father Ly's health condition, the Ambassador responded that he trusted Ly's self-diagnosis that his arm and leg were almost completely back to normal following his stroke. In response

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to a question about the prison's medical treatment for Father Ly, the Ambassador noted that Ly had expressed satisfaction with the treatment, and added that he was pleased Father Ly's family was allowed to visit. The reporter then stated that Father Ly violated the law, and asked whether the Ambassador felt Ly would "reform his actions so that he could be given early release." The Ambassador noted that Ly's beliefs had not changed, but called for Ly to be released on humanitarian grounds, emphasizing that Ly was not a threat to Vietnam. In response to a question posed by the print journalist regarding the Ambassador's views on Father Ly's idea for UN reform, the Ambassador said that reform of the United Nations was necessary, but hoped it would not take 300 years.

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